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Utahns to offer panel input on U.S. health-care reforms

Utahns to give input on how to reshape the system's quality

By Lois M. Collins

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"Everyday" Utahns are being given a final chance to chime in on the reshaping of America's health-care system. The Citizens' Health Care Working Group, a Congress-created panel tasked with making recommendations for improving both access to and quality of health-care services in America, will hold a community meeting in Salt Lake City on Saturday.

The Citizens' Health Care Working Group was created in 2003 in the Medicare modernization act co-sponsored by Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore. The 15-member bipartisan panel is charged with formulating recommendations to engage Americans about their concerns with the health-care system and to recommend policy changes to address shortcomings.

Richard Frank has formed some impressions about citizen concerns, during his time on the panel and his travels around the country gathering testimony. "We're hearing that people find the large number of uninsured people troubling. I think they find the complexity and cost of the system troubling. One of the things I've found surprising and reassuring is they have tremendous trust in local clinics and community health centers," he says. "They don't think there's enough of them or they are well enough funded, though."

During one meeting, participants were asked what having a health-care system that works for all Americans means to them. Frank was struck by one man's response: "I think we need a health-care system that Americans and particularly the elderly are not afraid of," the panel was told. The man gave an "extraordinarily detailed" explanation of what he and other elderly people find intimidating. "I found it very revealing. You pick up things like this at the meeting that allow you to go behind the numbers in a way that is very constructive," Frank says.

During the meeting, participants sit at tables with around 10 people at each, including a facilitator. A moderator poses questions for the whole group, then they have discussions among their table mates, followed by a general discussion. Each person is also given a keypad to vote on certain issues, Frank said.

The general public is invited to the meeting, 8 a.m. to noon on Saturday, at the Salt Lake Marriott Downtown, 75 S. West Temple. People can register in advance online at www.citizenshealthcare.gov or at the door.

The panel's report is due in September, although they are supposed to also make preliminary

recommendations in June. "We're listening extra hard now because we're getting to where the rubber meets the road," Frank says.

Utah has several close ties to the working group. Besides Hatch's sponsorship of the bill that created it, Dr. Brent James, a vice president of Intermountain Healthcare and professor at the University of Utah Medical School, serves on the panel, which includes Secretary of Health and Human Services Mike Leavitt, Utah's former governor. Other members represent a broad cross-section of America. None of them are elected officials or registered lobbyists.

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